

# Principals and Professors

## “Will the Twain Ever Meet?”

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### Abstract

Both authors returned to the field to serve as principals after a decade or more as professors of educational leadership. Despite a common perception that educational leadership professors are out of touch with practice, these authors felt at home with the practices and demands of their schools regardless of the intervening decade. They argue that good professors (even if some would represent them as too philosophical—the east of the twain that will never meet) are not as far from good practitioners (the west) as they are sometimes portrayed. A review of literature on other educational leadership professors’ experiences revisiting the field revealed that much about leading schools has not changed in more than half a century. Given the perennial issues of human development and scarce resources that school leaders face, the authors conclude that the divide between practitioners and professors of educational leadership is largely perceptual and that alternative routes to school leadership preparation are not likely to change experiences in the principalship.

### Introduction

One of the perpetual complaints about university-based preparation programs for educators disparages professors for their supposedly loose connection to the turbulent realities of schools. In a professional *Catch-22* depending on the

observer's perspective, professors in preparation programs for school leaders often lack credibility either because they have no practical credentials or conversely because they did accrue years in practice, rather than in academe (Burch, 1993; McCarthy, Kuh, Newell, & Iacona, 1988; McCarthy & Kuh, 1997; Shakeshaft, 2002). These deep divisions over who should prepare school leaders are part of the larger debate over what knowledge sources provide saliency to educators whose profession is characterized by the depth and breadth of human interactions enmeshed in a context of high expectations, conflicting demands, increasing accountability standards, and scarce resources (Culbertson, 1988; Haller, Brent, & McNamara, 1997; Donmoyer, 1999; Tucker, 2003). The purpose of this article is to focus on the divide between academics and practice through the experiences of the authors: two people who have lived in and revisited both sides of the canyon between schools and institutions of higher education in comparison to a select group of other academics who have reported similar experiences across several decades.

Depending on the era, the professoriate in educational administration has been differently characterized as too dominated by retired school managers who tell anecdotal *war stories* or conversely, overly populated by academics who rarely set foot in schools and espouse abstract, ungrounded theories (Culbertson, 1995; McCarthy et al., 1988; McCarthy & Kuh, 1997; Smith, 2000).

While the situation for any particular professor, department, or program lies somewhere between these extremes, some evidence suggests that a hidden group of adjunct professors, who remain practitioners, provide the basis of most aspiring administrators' preparation for licensure (Schneider, 2003; Shakeshaft, 2002). Such evidence renders the whole academic versus practitioner dichotomy overly simplistic and essentially moot.

Nevertheless, debates often are fueled by passions other than objective evidence. Currently, the field of educational leadership has generated a lot of attention based on claims about shortages of qualified candidates for the principalship (Educational Research Service, 1998). Presumably, extensive changes in school populations and the increasing attention to standardized tests for accountability purposes have augmented expectations for the principalship beyond all reason. One logical leap suggests university-based preparation programs are inadequate to meet these burgeoning expectations (Hess, 2003). The speculation indicts instructors, courses, or even the intersection of courses and instructors—instruction.

For nearly two decades, recommendations for improving instruction in educational leadership courses abound. Among the remedies are offerings such as using problem-based learning, application of standards to pre-service and job-embedded learning, and applying the principles of adult learning (Bridges, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Donmoyer, Imber, & Scheurich, 1995; Murphy & Hallinger, 1987; Orr, 2006; Prestine & LeGrand, 1991). Despite these innovations and

despite surveys showing a degree of satisfaction among practitioners concerning their preparation, assaults on university-based programs continue.

Applied fields are characterized by rapid developments in technologies and practices, which suggest that professors need retooling. Many applied fields recommend sabbaticals and job rotation to assure that workers refresh their knowledge and become more adaptable to emerging work demands as well as more promotable (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; "Job Rotation is Key," 1995; Sima & Denton, 1995). Some presume that extended time in higher education away from elementary and secondary classrooms and schools attenuate education professors' awareness and insights about the exigencies of practice. Presumably changing educational policies and demographics call into question previous heuristics and instruction concerning school leadership (Hurley, 2001; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; Kennedy, 2002).

Though not well publicized, practicing school leaders and professors take turns in elementary and secondary classrooms to refocus their scholarship and practice (Cuban, 1990; Marks, 2002). The extent to which professors of educational administration return to roles in school leadership also is not well documented and certainly not formally assessed in recent studies of the educational leadership professoriate such as the well publicized critique by Levine (2005). However, a smattering of evidence suggests that some institutions of higher education (IHE) occasionally loan professors to schools and districts to provide leadership to schools as a feature of the IHE's service mission.

This article reviews the experiences of five professors who returned to lead schools after a period of scholarship as university professors. The cases were collected to appraise the extent to which the professors identified dissonance between the conditions of schools and school leadership and their preparation or scholarship and whether or not the extent of dissonance depended on eras of education. The cases include both authors' recent experiences augmented with cases from previous professors' published reflections on their return to the principal's office. The dates of these five cases range from 1957 through 2002.

## **History of Professors' Return to Principal's Office**

Arguably, five published cases of professors venturing beyond their ivory towers to leading in the blackboard jungle serves as a limited pool for expounding on the quality and extent of any phenomenon. Yet these cases span nearly half a century and serve as one indicator that the connection between IHE and school leadership may not be as tenuous as many have argued. Furthermore, the cases offer some consistent messages about the nature of school leadership across time that hundreds of cases in one era could not provide. The following descriptions for the five cases offer readers a comparison of three elements of the cases: (a) the five professors-turned-to-principals' professional dossiers, (b) the five school

settings for their return to school leadership roles, and (c) the issues that each reported as salient. The case descriptions are presented in chronological order.

### ***Jesse Stuart (1956–1957)***

Jesse Stuart, a noted mid-20<sup>th</sup> century author, recounted his return to the high school in which he had served as principal exactly 20 years earlier. In the interim he had taught high school English, served twice as Superintendent and was a distinguished writer and lecturer, teaching graduate education courses in the United States and lecturing overseas. Despite his passion for education, Stuart felt driven from his high school teaching post in 1939 after disagreements over his teaching that included being the target of a shooting, an event he recounted in his first autobiography recognized as the best book on education by the National Education Association in 1949 (Jesse Stuart Foundation, n.d.; Stuart, 1949). Although his return to the principalship was a 1-year stint in 1956–1957, Stuart recounted the experience as occurring in 1959–1960 and further fictionalized the account publishing *Mr. Gallion's School* in 1967. The ensuing 10 years did not ameliorate the reaction of the real high school's community once the book appeared in print. Community members, to this day, share personal memories of rural Kentucky's response to Stuart's version of the events and personalities in the high school.

The community's upheaval over the printing of *Mr. Gallion's School* is understandable from a literary standpoint. Stuart's voice is overwhelming in his account. He justifies and sanctifies his efforts at emancipating students from the oppression of cultural deprivation, community corruption, and even professional ennui. While a few of the teachers and other adult community members are depicted sympathetically, most of the antagonists lack dimension if not intellect in Stuart's rendition. Nevertheless, Stuart's tendency to include autobiography in all his works as well as the transparency of his work serves our purposes in validating the nature and persistence of problems in schooling that Stuart recounts.

Stuart's high school occupied a hill in a rural Kentucky school district on the Ohio River. Although the school district has remodeled and revamped facilities many times since 1957, two buildings bear the same name as the school where Stuart once worked. In the late 1950s, 1,100 populated the county seat. Today, 7,500 people live there. Stuart's superintendent told him to expect 500 students, but 625 showed up, and the building was created for 300 students.

Before school started, Stuart faced the placement and renovations of "pre-fabs" to accommodate the expected enrollment. Worst of all, he had only a few weeks to recruit teachers since only six were contracted by July to teach the expected 500 students.

Discipline problems plagued Stuart's high school. Students roamed the school grounds at lunch and stole milk and other deliveries when the trucks parked at the school. Stuart also describes students who brought guns to school as well as problems with students stuffing toilets to shut off water and force the

school to close for the day. In contrast Stuart also writes of students who filled positions as teachers for younger students.

Stuart's staff problems went further than a shortage of qualified teachers. He writes of one teacher who kept funds raised by and for students outside of the school's accounting system. This teacher served a recurring role as adversary to all of Stuart's attempts at reform in the school, though eventually Stuart exposes the man's hypocrisy.

Stuart also describes community conflict over school dances. The tale of some community members' objections to a school dance sound a nearly trite theme, yet, these conflicts remain in many districts today.

Stuart writes with passion about overcoming the obstacles of both human dynamics and scarce resources in the interest of students and their education. Among the dramatic stories he tells is a constant theme of making do and being creative to reach beyond the limits of human foibles and few resources.

### ***Luvern L. Cunningham (1968–1969)***

Vern Cunningham was dean of a large school of education at the state university located in the capital when he arranged to spend a week as principal in a public junior high school. He had been a public school administrator prior to going to the university. The school he went into was in a large urban system with which the university had cooperated on a number of efforts. It was "generally regarded as the most difficult school in the cooperating system" (Cunningham, 1969, p. 123). The description Cunningham (1969) gives is quite noteworthy.

When the bell sounds and classes pass it is a wild place. It's wild in between times, too. . . . Apparently the pattern in the building is that if you can't get a hearing for your complaint anywhere else you end up in the principal's office. I had a steady flow of customers. . . . Everyone hoped to make it through the day without large-scale violence. (p. 124)

Cunningham explains that he has great respect for the personnel that are in the school day in and day out, "the faculty are tired, disheartened, even despondent. But they don't want to fail" (Cunningham, 1969, p. 125). In addition to low faculty morale, Cunningham describes a seething student body: "The cancer of hate is latent within the student body. You sense its power. You sense its presence and the prospect for its release at any moment" (Cunningham, 1969, p. 127).

Over and above these human interaction issues Cunningham (1969) discussed scarce resources as part of what needed to be dealt with in schools. He concludes that:

There are many schools in America like the one I have described. . . . And all of us who bear professional credentials must carry that cross.

Such educational institutions are an indictment of presidents and senators; of justices and teachers; of governors and legislators . . . politicians wailing and wringing their hands, spouting platitudes and diatribes. (p. 128)

The issue of outside perspectives can be inferred from a comment about experts in which Cunningham (1969) notes:

The most expert may be those professionals who are there every day engaging in the fray. But they are reaching out, and it is for this reason that some kind of liaison with universities and other sources of ideas is critical. (p. 128)

Cunningham's article reveals a thread of dedication to students that exceeds the limits of poor resources and poor relationships. In his description of the school and its educators, Cunningham notes the degree to which teachers continue to work in conditions beyond hope. The paucity of the conditions emphasizes students' needs for environments richer than most schools' are ever funded to be, and for relationships that smooth the turbulence of students' lives.

### ***Robert Donmoyer (1989–1990)***

Bob Donmoyer was a nationally recognized researcher when he arranged a one-quarter leave of absence and became principal of a middle school. Although teaching in a very prestigious educational administration program, he had not had the full formal training usually given to administrators. He did have an administrative certificate which he received (Donmoyer, 1995):

. . . after an exceedingly generous and creative reading of my transcripts by State Department of Education personnel at a time when certification requirements in the state were both small in number and vaguely defined (under current requirements, it would take me at least a year of full time classwork to qualify for a principal certificate in my state). (p. 78)

He also did not have public school administration experience, although he had worked in schools and was familiar with teaching and learning. So while not traditionally trained, he was far from an outsider. The school was a suburban primarily "middle and upper middle class . . . although new . . . the school's population had become more heterogeneous both economically and ethnically" (Donmoyer, 1995, p. 75). "I discovered to be my primary task while playing the principal role: mediating disputes" (Donmoyer, 1995, p. 87). Human interaction seemed to play a vital role in the success that Donmoyer achieved.

While perhaps not as overtly traumatic as Stuart or Cunningham's situation there seemed to be plenty of stressors in the principalship that Donmoyer took over. There was the no assistant principal in the school of 570 students so he had the "responsibility for all discipline beyond the classroom level and for

all teacher evaluation. Also during my tenure, ten percent had to be cut from the existing budget and a budget for the next academic year had to be prepared” (Donmoyer, 1995, p 75). Obviously, scarce resources were issues for Donmoyer.

### ***Jane Clark Lindle (1999–2000)***

Janie Lindle had just attained promotion to Professor after serving 13 years in higher education. Previously she had taught special education in elementary and secondary schools in both public and non-public schools. After obtaining her doctorate, she had become a principal of a small school that she had to close due to declining enrollment. Then she served for 4 years as principal of a Catholic elementary school encompassing Grades 1 through 8 before assuming a position as a university professor. Lindle kept close ties to the field through research and service in nearly 100 elementary and secondary schools over her 13 years in academe.

During the summer of 2000, one of the school districts where Lindle had provided extensive service approached her concerning their failure to fill a middle school principal position. The school’s previous principal had served there for 13 years and had taken a position elsewhere. The district also was accepting its fourth superintendent in 8 years.

Lindle approached the dean of the college of education at the University of Kentucky, a land grant, and research institution with a statewide mission. The Kentucky legislature had passed a statute in the late 1980s providing a yearlong administrator certificate to college and university professors for a year’s service in public schools. Lindle was the first and to date, only, professor to apply for, or receive, the certification. The university and school district arranged a memorandum of agreement in which the university assigned 80% of Lindle’s time to the school district and the district paid the university for her services through the academic year 2000–2001.

The middle school sat at the suburban edge of a small Kentucky city, population 27,000. The county itself has a number of rural vistas, but the population is fairly dense at nearly 50,000. The school housed nearly 750 students and a staff of 60 including 45 faculty members. About 7% of the staff and 12% of the student body claimed African American heritage. Nearly 31% of the students qualified for the free and reduced price federal meal program. The physical plant was adequate, but aging and suffering from sloppy renovations as well as few resources for adequate maintenance. Though the school served a geographic half of a nearly homogeneous community, it suffered in the cross-town mythology about the accomplishments and wealth of its lesser-enrolled rival. Both schools faced challenges in meeting the high stakes assessment and accountability standards assigned by the state. At the time of Lindle’s assignment, the larger middle school had already received services from one of Kentucky’s Highly Skilled Educators, and school staff as well as informants at the Kentucky Department of Education reported that the collaboration was forced, unsatisfying, and ultimately unsuccessful.



Before assuming the position, Lindle was duly interviewed by the district's new superintendent who wondered whether or not assigning her to the middle school was a big risk for his first year. Lindle commented that she faced a huge risk as well. She recognized that many of the middle school teachers probably would not welcome her with open arms and worried that 1 year might not be enough to overcome the uncertainties of a new leader inserted into an established faculty and school community. Lindle received assurance that both the central office and the parent community would support efforts for reforms that could and would disrupt the school's *status quo*. The superintendent and district leaders laid out Lindle's immediate challenges as the following:

- Student achievement and discipline;
- Faculty and staff culture and supervision;
- Fiscal management and control; and
- Building maintenance and upkeep.

Though each of these four areas created a panorama and associated drama on their own, all of them shared the same origins stemming from the human dynamics associated with scarce resources. Whenever Lindle addressed any of the issues, the prevailing state of each represented a tenuous equilibrium that had been painstakingly negotiated with the previous principal and other actors with a stake in the problem and outcome. Despite the civilized connotation that the word *negotiation* generates, Lindle found that teachers, parents, and students all bore wounds and scars from the way previous conflicts were resolved. Lindle faced a culture dominated by a history of leadership acquiescing to the preferences of assertive teachers. Many parents acclimated to the middle school's teacher-centered culture by both assertive and aggressive behavior as advocates for their children at all costs. In such a charged environment, Lindle struggled to find middle ground and frequently succeeded in achieving limited truces in the style of *Horace's Compromise* (Sizer, 1984). On the other hand, nearing the end of her term, reflecting both a sense of urgency to fulfill her obligations with the district superintendent's charge for change as well as several staff members' disillusionment with Lindle's direction on several of the school's pressing issues, Lindle's participation proved to escalate differences rather than mediate or resolve them. As testimony to the changes in staff culture that Lindle affected, the school experienced a 32% turnover in personnel at the end of the school year. Three years later, the school staff turned over 80%, but in the fourth year, the personnel stabilized retaining 75%.

Although Lindle brought the practical experience from nearly 20 years earlier serving in two different schools, Lindle's academic credentials proved very useful. Much of the work for the year involved aggregating, interpreting, and presenting school, classroom, teacher, and student data to various stakeholders. Among the moments that Lindle could negotiate truces or mediate actions, data served as the tool for attaining common ground. In the face of the state's and the



school district's high stakes accountability environment, the school lingered in an anecdotal era. For a long time the school's culture had supported teachers who told persuasive stories powerfully, but the use of data to ameliorate the potency of anecdotes deflated some of the school's overblown myths. Other teachers began to more fully develop their own record keeping and moved the culture to align with the district and state's requirements to create a more rational system for educating young adolescents.

In Lindle's yearlong experience, the twin challenges of school leadership rose on a daily if not hourly basis. First, the human dynamics of any middle school seemed exacerbated by tensions between parents and teachers, teachers and students, and to some extent, teachers and other teachers. Second, student needs outstripped the resources available to the school. On a few occasions, the staff pulled together to address scarcity with creativity and imagination.

### ***A. William Place (2000–2002)***

Will Place had been at the university for 14 years counting his full time doctoral work before he arranged to have a sabbatical for the purpose of reconnecting with the field. Previously he had been a teacher, assistant principal, and full time union representative. The community in which he was given the opportunity to reconnect did not fit easily into set categorizations. The high school was in a township that was approximately 85% African American. Many of the African Americans moved there in the decade of the 1970s as a group of middle class families seeking a better school system. Many of the European Americans that were there consisted of mostly lower socio-economic families that lived in one neighborhood that was part of what bordered on the city, but there were several exceptions to this generalization (e.g., there were still some farmers maintaining a rural dimension in this complex community).

A large portion of the district was bordered by the large urban district in the area and on another side it was bordered by what would be best described as a suburban district, and on yet another side was a rural district. Within the district there were characteristics of all three types of communities, but visually much of the district had the appearance of a rural community. The economic level was generally low based on average household income, but the many of the houses were very nice and generally well kept. The first year Place was principal there were approximately 200 students in Grades 9 through 12, but the year after he left it was up to approximately 300 students. The mobility of students was mostly experienced as back and forth transfers between the city and the township. Therefore many people outside the community perceived this to be an urban school, but it was nothing like the situation Stuart or Cunningham described. In fact, most students knew almost everyone else in the school and some described the atmosphere as family-like, not unlike many small closely knit communities. It was a community in which Place truly felt blessed to become accepted as the high school principal.

Like Donmoyer, Place found that mediation of disputes was an important role. This included: (a) teacher versus teacher over a variety of issues—although the lowest in frequency this was a tough problem when it surfaced; (b) teacher versus student over dress code, etc.; (c) parent versus teacher over discipline, curriculum, grades, etc.; and (d) the human dynamics included that there were underlying differences in perspective that the new superintendent and Place had with some faculty as the new administration tried to make the system more student centered and achieve higher academic performance. These four examples seem to exemplify a part of human interactions prevalent in school leadership, but human interactions in schools involve much more than mediation of disputes. The vast majority of these interactions are positive. A former student who reviewed an earlier draft noted, “Mediation of conflict is important, but I believe that initiating and fostering positive relationships between students and the community is equally as important for the educational process.”

Particular staff disagreed with Place’s educational philosophy. One teacher shared her feeling that there was “not enough fear . . . kids should fear authority . . . [instead] kids think that if they go to you the principal that they will be listened to.” Some teachers wanted certain students out of the school. They could not be concerned with what happen to those that were expelled, they just wanted to have control and to be able to teach as they preferred. There were teachers that fully agreed and supported the changes. However, in between the first and second year of Place’s principalship 9 out of 27 teachers left (some for personal reasons, some for financial or professional reasons, but a few departures were due to disagreements with Place’s approach).

One student was removed, and that student had threatened to beat up a teacher. Place personally had to stand in the student’s path and explain that he would not allow that to happen. During this loud exhibition by the student, Place never felt any fear. Up to this event, Place had a very good relation with this student and knew that while the student was very angry, he did not believe that the student really wanted to commit an act of violence. Nonetheless, the threat of violence toward a teacher was made (that most of the school heard) and therefore the student would not be allowed to continue in the school.

High stakes tests, which were held in low regard by teachers and at some levels even by Place himself, but which were pervasive in district life. The school and district had to have a continuous improvement plan, which was monitored by the state. The district moved from Emergency (lowest rating in the 5 state categories) to Academic Watch with some emotional reaction (i.e., feeling less pressure).

Many teachers were very dedicated. Even the teachers that disagreed with the changes felt that they were working for the best interest of students. The pay scale was lower than most schools in the area, but many teachers stayed. Perhaps they stayed because, like Place, they felt they were helping some students

and felt blessed to be a part of this close knit community. After Place left the scarcity of resources became even more acute, and the district was forced to make budget cuts including some positions (this happened at many schools across the state during this time period). This is the second point made by the former student member checker who noted, “the problem of scarce resources . . . becomes a major problem in an environment of strict accountability, (standardized texts, state report cards, etc.). The challenge of meeting those standards with inadequate resources is one of the greatest burdens facing an administrator.” While not all of the students had such deep insight, the reader can readily see why Place felt so blessed to be able to work with young people with such remarkable talents.

### **Common Challenges for Schooling**

Some themes seemed to cut across the various stories. Specifically, human interaction and scarce resources were consistent across all five experiences. The human interaction involved various groups—students, teachers, parents being the main ones. Each academic returning to the principal’s role was able to deal with these interactions with a knowledge base steeped in school culture. Cunningham’s and Donmoyer’s experiences were the shortest in duration and they had the least to say that would directly indicate the value of knowing about school culture, but even in their accounts are issues that would seem to be much too specific for the untrained outsider to handle.

Schooling is an ambitious enterprise. Students come to schools with more than material needs for learning. They bring issues of emotional development as well as a range of social service requirements. Being a school leader requires not only a complete understanding of the educational demands, but also skills in addressing student needs with limited resources.

Few people are innately ready for leading schools. Knowledge about education as well as a grasp of human dynamics is a unique combination of knowledge and skills few other enterprises involve. School leaders need formal knowledge about human development and learning, group dynamics, and especially, the ongoing information and research developments concerning special education, and school safety and discipline. None of these areas exemplify common knowledge in other fields. That is, while those with military or business backgrounds may understand human dynamics among people over the age of 17, most don’t have a grasp of the complications of those intergenerational dynamics or among people under 17 years old. Few business or military leaders face the raft of laws and regulations surrounding special education, and even fewer understand educational issues faced by children with disabilities or their teachers. While military leaders may offer important insights into the maintenance of school safety, some military disciplinary practices are not appropriate for schools.

## Conclusion

When the complexity of human dynamics in schools is added to the perennial issues of scarcity, the complications of school leadership mount. Presumably business and military leaders face scarcity and must confront it creatively on at least a short-term basis. School scarcities are permanent, and the innovation required for addressing scarcity is constant.

The authors believe that we need to quit assuming the past is better than the present or future. University-preparation is as valid or more so than the drive-by professional development (PD) now offered for school leaders in dealing with ongoing issues of human interaction and scarce resources. Therefore the efforts to move away from schools of education at universities for the preparation of school leaders maybe misguided. Efforts to strengthen university program connections with schools would be more productive, particularly if such programs deal with human interaction in the schools and the handling of scare resources.

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